5 Pakistan's Flailing Foreign Policy During Covid-19

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Introduction

Covid-19 has wreaked havoc within South Asia, especially Pakistan. According to the World Health Organization, as of September 2021, there have been 1,232,595 confirmed cases of Covid-19 and 27,432 deaths associated with the virus.[1] The real numbers are probably higher. The number of coronavirus cases have also been increasing steadily as the Omicron variant has found its way to Pakistan. As at January 2022, Pakistan was experiencing a positivity rate of 3.66%. In other words, the daily cases were above 1,500.[2]

The Government of Pakistan, like all South Asian countries, has struggled to contain the virus. While Prime Minister Imran Khan was reluctant to fully close the economy immediately, his administration began to close the state's borders with Iran and Afghanistan as early as January 2020, which was followed by suspending all international flights, except from major airports (namely Islamabad, Karachi, and Lahore) by March.[3] March and April 2020 proved to be a critical time for Pakistan as the number of cases increased exponentially. The government eventually closed the border with China and temporarily halted China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects; suspended the Pakistan Day parade (which was scheduled to be held on March 23, 2020) and all cricket matches; and began screening domestic travelers at the Jinnah airport in Karachi. President Arif Alvi tweeted that the public should avoid large gatherings and physical contact like hugging and shaking hands, especially if experiencing flu-like symptoms.[4] The National Security Council also met to discuss contact tracing and by the summer of 2020 established the National Command and Operation Center (NCOC) to coordinate the government's response to the pandemic.

The stress of COVID-19, therefore, added to pressures that the Khan administration was already experiencing since winning the election in 2018. After a year in office, Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) unveiled its first annual budget for fiscal year 2019/20 and indicated a massive decline in its projected growth: from 6.2% to 2.4%.[5] To combat this downward trend, Prime Minister Khan announced the creation of a special commission to investigate

why the country was in so much debt. The Khan administration made increasing the sources of revenues (specifically those focused on establishing effective tax collection practices) and decreasing non-development expenditures a priority. In mid-2019 the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved a $6 billion bailout package, but with strict conditions that had many government officials and economists predict that the aid package was too restrictive and unrealistic in its projections, especially as Pakistan's economy was shrinking instead of expanding.[6] When Covid-19 hit in early 2020, the economy was nowhere near improved, deepening concerns about an economic stagnation. Pakistan also remained on the Financial Action Task Force's (FATF)—a global money laundering and terrorist financing watchdog—"grey" list, which added to the country's economic and political pressures. CPEC was also slowing down, raising concerns that if the slowdown continued, it would negatively affect Pakistan's relationship with China. Finally, in 2019–20 Pakistan was also waiting to see what would become of the Afghan peace process, where the United States had a withdrawal date (May 1, 2021, according to deal between the Taliban and the United States), and the Afghan government and Taliban were at the negotiating table, but little progress was being made.

By the time the coronavirus took hold of Pakistan, in early 2020 it was clear that the Khan administration was in over its head, which tragically was the case with numerous countries worldwide. The government wasted no time in creating the NCOC, which is the joint civil-military task force, to coordinate the national Covid-19 response. The NCOC, however, is more military-led than civilian-led: high-ranking military officers play a visible role. While Khan chairs the meetings, especially those of the National Coordination Committee, which is the decision-making arm of the NCOC, Chief of Army Staff Qamar Bajwa also attends those meetings. In order to control the spread of the coronavirus, the NCOC imposed "smart lockdowns" across cities where numbers were increasing rapidly.[7] The Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistan's premier intelligence agency, used its surveillance techniques for contact-tracing;[8] while effective, it has raised some concerns about how such a system of surveillance and tracking would continue to be used once the pandemic is over. When vaccines came out, Pakistan struggled to obtain them like most developing countries, but has acquired vaccines from China, Russia, and now the United States, and is steadily vaccinating its population.[9]

Granted, controlling the pandemic and preventing its spread, especially in an economically poor country like Pakistan, is a priority and the state should/must utilize all of its resources to combat the virus. Yet, the fact that the military has been at the forefront of what should be a civilian domain—responding to a health crisis—indicates just how deeply rooted the military is in Pakistan's society. While Pakistan's civil-military imbalance is old news—and not surprising when considering its political history (Jalal 2014; Jaffrelot 2015)—the deepening imbalance and reliance on the military has raised some eyebrows in both scholarly and academic circles. In this chapter,

I argue that this growing civil-military imbalance might, for once, work in Pakistan's favor, and allow it to refocus its flailing foreign policy on the country's economic concerns. I argue that the Covid-19 pandemic is a "critical interruption": a political event that does not necessarily threaten a state's self-identity needs, but forces a state to respond, and generate and regenerate narratives that legitimize and justify the state's policy choices, which eventually result in "institutionalized routines," which helps a state acquire ontological security.

To show this pivot, this chapter is divided as follows. The first section explains the concept of ontological security, arguing that the security achieved by meeting self-identity needs is equally important to a state's physical security. I also outline the factors that contribute to Pakistan's ontological security, and which ultimately impact its foreign policy. Finally, I will explain a generalizable ontological security framework I developed during my fieldwork in Pakistan, as a tool to better understand the state's identity and geostrategic needs. The second section dives into Pakistan's foreign policy, and the three main pillars that frame it, which are: it's acrimonious relationship with India, its weakening relationship with the United States, and its stable relationship with China. Pakistan's domestic response to Covid-19, however, has affected the country's foreign policy in unique ways, providing a rare opportunity for the state to reevaluate its foreign policy strategies and goals. The third section will provide pathways on how Pakistan can accomplish this shift toward equalizing its economic needs with its security ones, while remaining both physically and ontologically secure.

An Ontological Security Framework

The Concept of Ontological Security

What is ontological security? One of the core assumptions of realist international relations (IR) theory is that states prioritize their security and power—both of which are captured by a state's physical territory. The state's need for physical security—and its priority in protecting its physical territory—gives rise to the security dilemma and the practice of deterrence. The security dilemma is a core concept in IR theory: in an uncertain and anarchic international system in which states are rational actors, any action taken by a state to bolster its own security might threaten the security of another state, creating the classical dilemma. In a seminal essay, Jennifer Mitzen (2006) argues that states also prioritize their "ontological security" along with their physical security.

Ontological security refers to the security acquired by a continuous identity, and the agency that is created by maintaining this self-identity. The concept of ontological security—and seeking it—is drawn from the individual level, in which an individual seeks stability in an uncertain environment. Uncertainty at both the individual and state level is viewed as a threat. On the

individual level, when an individual is uncertain of his/her actions and lacks confidence in their abilities to confront a problem, ontological *insecurity* is generated. Mitzen (2006) describes this state as "the deep, incapacitating state of not knowing which dangers to confront and which to ignore, i.e. how to get by in the world" (345). The individual then focuses on immediate, short-term needs, rather then focusing on planning for future needs and other long-term goals. When experiencing ontological insecurity, the individual is unable to realize a sense of agency. The rationalist perspective, however, assumes that all individual actors have sufficient information that allows them to act rationally. But uncertainty in the external environment reduces confidence. The mechanism for combating ontological insecurity lies in establishing routines via social relationships. Routines create stability and that stability helps to sustain identity. More importantly, the stability achieved by routines foster agency, leading to ontological *security*. Ontological security, therefore, is the condition in which an individual acquires confidence in his/her social relationships; the agency obtained by feeling ontologically secure allows to individual to hold on to their identity (Mitzen 2006, 345–48). Applied at the state level, a state acquires ontological security by creating routines via policies and relationships with other states via its foreign policy. By establishing and maintaining relationships with other states, a state reduces uncertainty, and hence creates its own agency. Ontological security, therefore, is similar to the state's need for physical security, and so like physical security, ontological security is a constant and cannot explain variation (Mitzen 2006, 343).

Mitzen (2006) presents three rationales for arguing that states seek ontological security. First, physical protection of a state is considered a priority and in IR, the state is considered a rational actor. The concept of sovereignty and its relationship to the physical body of the state, however, complicates the meaning of what is considered a state. Understanding a state's "personhood" encourages the development of looking beyond just physical security (Wendt 2004). Assuming that a state seeks both physical and ontological security, therefore, is conceptually compatible and "theoretically productive" (Mitzen 2006, 352). Second, each state is distinct: it consists of groups that prioritize maintaining their identity. Relationships between various groups lead to routines that reduce uncertainty and provide security and a collective national identity that allows for agency. It is logical then to assume that states are not just invested in protecting their physical body but also prioritize their identities and the factors that make them distinct in the international system. This also gives rise to the notion that state institutions have the ability to project images of the state—images that citizens become attached to and have complicated relationships with (Mitzen 2006, 352). For example, Brent Steele (2008) argues that states pursue moral, humanitarian, and honor-driven social actions to meet their self-identity needs even in instances where meeting such needs might compromise their physical security. The images and narratives that the state constructs, therefore, play an important role in a state's ontological security. The third rationale comes from empirical research: how sometimes

applying micro-level assumptions and concepts allows for a better understanding of macro-level outcomes and patterns. For example, there is a wide literature on American leaders during the Cold War and how each reacted similarly to the Soviet Union's actions despite themselves having very varied personalities (Mitzen 2006, 352; Dougherty and Pflatzgraff, Jr. 2001, 553–615). Ontological security, therefore, provides a sociological basis for understanding state actions (Mitzen 2006, 353).

An ontological security framework is a constructivist approach that is reflexive, and hence, can be interpretive in nature. Ontological security scholars do not use causal analysis to explain state behavior. Instead, we interpret state action by evaluating the political contexts that create social reality, recognizing that actions are not objective and devoid of context. As realists assume that leaders use political rhetoric to convince the public of "unsavory 'security' policies" (Steele 2008, 260), ontological security scholars assume that state agents use politics to secure the state's self-identity, use narratives to develop routinized foreign and domestic policies, promote a certain image of the state, and control the strategic environment in a way that reduces uncertainty (Steele 2008, 246–78). I conceptualize the processes of ontological security creation and maintenance as an interconnected system in which state agents: 1) create a "biographical narrative" that employs a variety of narratives to create meanings and develop a state's self-identity needs; 2) determine "critical interruptions" that are political events that result in state action; and 3) legitimize continuous state policies, which I label as "institutionalized routines." By reconstructing state motivations, therefore, ontological security scholars are not only theorizing about state self-identity, but are also uncovering other avenues for understanding state rationality (Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008, 286–88).

Using an ontological security framework to analyze a state's foreign policy serves four important purposes. First, it forces scholars to rethink rationality and state rationale, which is often taken for granted in IR. Second, understanding how states seek ontological security helps to analyze agency and discover new mechanisms by which a state practices and utilizes the agency it achieves by meeting its social and identity needs. As foreign policy is a key tool by which a state interacts with the international community, studying it using an ontological security framework is logical. Third, it unpacks the state, rather than black-boxing it, as is the traditional IR approach. Disaggregating the state and investigating how it maintains its ontological security is important for understanding state policies and actions, particularly with regards to its foreign policy. And finally, analyzing how a global event, like the Covid-19 pandemic, contributes to a state's ontological security provides the intellectual basis for problematizing foreign policy goals and national security interests: what they mean collectively and how they can respond to new threats.
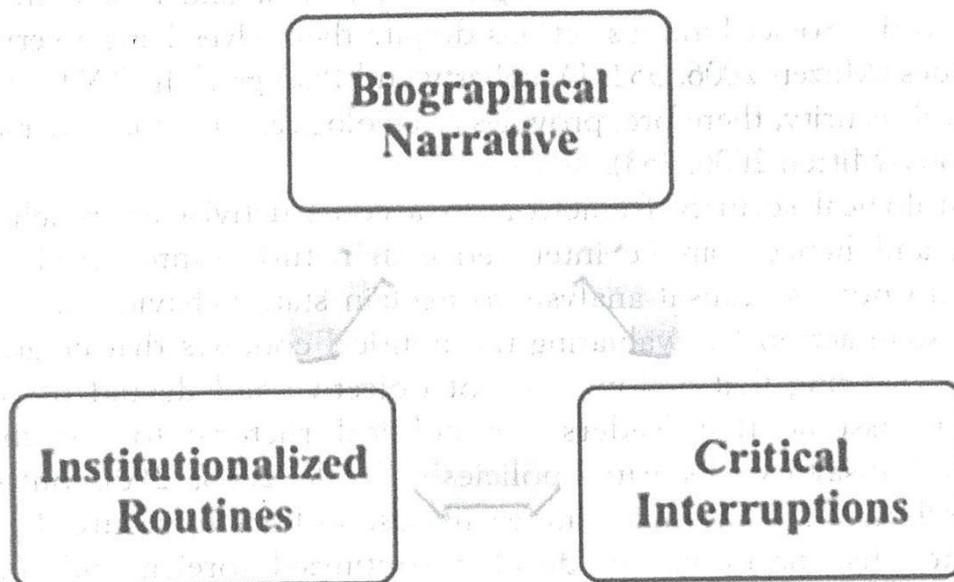
Figure 5.1 Processes of Ontological Security

Pakistan's Ontological Security: Seeking Stability via a Security-Focused Foreign Policy

The relationship between the state's actions and its identity is fluid: actions are dependent on identity while identity is reinforced by actions (Wendt 1992, 402–403).[10] For example, foreign policies need to assign meaning to a situation to be able to formulate a response, which utilizes specific identities of other states, regions, communities, and institutions (Hansen 2006, 6). Within an ontological security framework, identity-related needs are established through continuous actions, which fulfill the state's need for stability and certainty. An interruption in these actions causes instability and uncertainty, and hence leads to ontological *insecurity*. Identity, therefore, is not a standalone fact about a state. Instead, it needs to be interpreted in reference to state actions and inaction. This does not mean that I do not consider the history of the modern nation-state, as laid out by Richard Matthew (2002) or that I am not cognizant of the relationship between identity and nationalism. I use Lisa Wedeen's (2008) conception of nationalism. She argues that state institutions are critical to the development of nationalism because state institutions not only have the power to record, educate, and police the population, but are instrumental for tying together state sovereignty and the state's territory (7–8). In other words, state institutions reinforce the state's territory and borders while projecting and facilitating nationalist images and

discourses. This is consistent with Lang's (2002) and Steele's (2008) argument that state agents constitute the state and the state's self-identity needs. I further their argument by positing that state agents use state institutions to form and drive the state's self-identity needs.

Neta Crawford (2002) puts forth three components of political identity: 1) a social identity, which refers to a sense of self in relation to and/or distinct from others, 2) a historical narrative about the self; and 3) an ideology (114). Pakistan's social identity is dominated by its security dilemma with India—a dilemma that has roots in the history of Muslim–Hindu tensions in the subcontinent (Gupta 1988, 112–118; Bose and Jalal 1997; Karim 2010; Wolpert 2010, 7–17). Indo–Pakistani tensions stem from six sources. First is Kashmir, the disputed territory that lies in the northeast of Pakistan, and over which the two states have fought three conventional wars and have had countless minor military exchanges (Wirsing 1993; Cohen 2002; Kapur 2010). The second is support of separatist movements across the border by each. India's support of the *Mukti Bahini*, Bengali freedom fighters, was crucial in the 1971 civil war that resulted in the breakup of Pakistan and formation of Bangladesh as a sovereign state (Dash 2008, 2139–2230; Ghoush 1989, 57–103). Pakistan's military strategy of supporting Kashmiri insurgent groups has provided Pakistan with a way to stealthily counter Indian rule in Kashmir while appeasing its own religious political parties, who often exploit the Kashmir dispute to mobilize public sentiment and increase their own legitimacy (Kapur and Ganguly 2012; Zahab and Roy 2004, 27; Byman 2005, 155–185). India claims that Pakistani-supported terrorist attacks within India have increased since 2002 (Byman 2005, 184)[11] while Pakistan denies the allegations. India also accuses Pakistan of lending support to the Sikh uprising in East Punjab (Hussain 1993, 153) that eventually resulted in the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on October 31, 1984.

The third source of the Indo–Pakistani animosity is a military rivalry, which has resulted in both states developing nuclear weapons and missile capabilities (Ahmed 1999; Ganguly and Kapur 2010; Watt 2012; Chengappa 2016)—which almost led to a military conflict in Kargil in 1999 (Sagan and Waltz 2002; Rao 2016). The fourth source of tension has been the United States relationship with Pakistan. India views the US–Pakistani partnership as a hindrance and one that encourages Pakistan to challenge India regionally—this was especially the case during the Cold War (Ayoob 2000, 30; Muppidi 1999; Thornton 1993). Fifth is the religious and ethnic communal tensions aggravated by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of India (Buzan and Waever 2003, 108; Varshney 2002). The BJP does not seek separatism but instead seeks a strong national defense that includes nuclear deterrence. It also has a no-compromise policy on Kashmir and supports its integration into India via a special status granted to Kashmir in the Indian constitution. And the sixth source of Indo–Pakistani tension is water. The Indus Basin Irrigation System was originally conceived as a unified system, but it was split up after Partition. In April 1948 India cut off the water

supply to Pakistan, resulting in an international water dispute between the two. A treaty was eventually signed in 1960 to resolve any future water disputes, but tensions often flare up, providing just another reason for both states to have a standoff (Kugelman 2016).

Pakistan's historical narrative is also intrinsically linked with Islam. The lack of consensus amongst South Asian Muslims on the meaning of Islam has created complicated and often competing conceptions of religion, identity, nationalism, and Muslim power in South Asia (Mullick and Yusuf 2009, 12). Pakistan not only inherited this puzzle but also unwittingly become a victim of the Two-Nation Theory, developed by Pakistan's founder, Mohammad Ali Jinnah. The Two-Nation Theory was a result of a combination of writings and speeches of Indian Muslim activists. It does not define "nation" on the basis of culture, language, history, territory, or customs but on religion. In the pre-Partition political environment, Jinnah and the Muslim League supported this theory that argued that Hindus and Muslims were two separate nations with distinct social orders, and hence, could never exist under a single, united nationality (Karim 2010). It remains unclear whether Jinnah wanted Pakistan to be a secular or a theocratic state (Jalal 1994; Karim 2010). Secularists, modernists, liberals, religious groups, etc. have all used Jinnah's philosophy to justify their own view of Pakistan, creating an ideological struggle within the country. As such, Pakistan's ideology is difficult to decipher. It is fraught with cultural contradictions and existential crises, and Pakistan still struggles with establishing a coherent identity (Cohen 2004; Shaikh 2009; Haider 2010; Wolpert 2010; Constable 2011; Jalal 2014; Shah 2014; Jaffrelot 2015; Rumi 2016).

What, then, is Pakistan's self-identity? It remains a puzzle as Pakistan is still developing a political identity. Two pillars, however, have emerged. The first is that Pakistan views itself as an "Islamic" country and a defender of Islam and protector of Muslims. The second pillar is that it must counter India, its hostile neighbor, and protect itself from Indian aggression and perceived anti-Islam stance. This second pillar feeds into Pakistan's foreign policy on the whole and has influenced the state's institutionalized routines, one of which is to prioritize its security concerns over its economic needs within its foreign policy.

A Rare Opportunity for Pakistan's Foreign Policy

Pakistan's Security-Focused Foreign Policy

Pakistan's foreign policy has three pillars: Its acrimonious relationship with India, its weakening relationship with the United States, and its stable relationship with China. The factors that drive Pakistan's relationship with India have been described above, but current tensions are based on the clash of the Khan and Modi administrations. Khan and the PTI was elected in 2018, while Modi and the BJP were re-elected in 2019. In August 2019, Prime

Minister Modi revoked the autonomous status of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh and implemented a wide variety of suppressive measures to deter Kashmiris from expressing their outrage. Pakistan and several other countries protested this move, but the Indian public welcomed it. The special status has not been reinstated.[12] The Modi administration also lobbied the FATF to put Pakistan on its grey list in 2018 and has been pushing to get the country on the black list, but has not succeeded. While Pakistan argues that India is using the non-political FATF for its political goals, India argues that it is simply trying to hold Pakistan accountable for being complicit in terrorist-related financing and money laundering.[13] Another current issue of contention between India and Pakistan is Pakistan's support of the Taliban, which has been ongoing since the 1990s (Rashid 2010).

Pakistan's support of the Taliban in Afghanistan has also deeply impacted its relationship with the United States over the past two decades. As the second pillar of Pakistan's security-focused foreign policy, the state's bilateral relationship with the United States is extremely important to it for a host of security, economic, and political reasons. Ever since the George W. Bush administration launched the Global War on Terror after the September 11, 2001 terror attacks on US soil, the bilateral relationship has been overly focused on counterterrorism and the US war in Afghanistan. After 20 years, the United States finally withdrew from Afghanistan, but the withdrawal has been a disaster. Throughout the war, the United States accused Pakistan of playing a "double game" (Coll 2018; Khan 2018) but also urged Pakistan to use its leverage with the Taliban to bring the group to the negotiating table. Now, the Taliban are back in power after the Afghan National Security Forces fell and President Ashraf Ghani and his cabinet fled the country. While no country has officially recognized the Taliban, Pakistan is urging the international community not to isolate the Taliban.[14]

The third pillar of Pakistan's foreign policy is its relationship with China. Pakistan and China have always had a steady relationship. Recently, China has supported bringing the Kashmir issue to the UN's agenda in its support of Pakistan.[15] Pakistan in turn has sided with China and opposed the interference of the UN Human Rights Council in China's domestic affairs, especially with respect to its treatment of Uyghurs.[16] CPEC, of course, has played a huge role in improving the bilateral relationship. As a developing country, Pakistan is in desperate need of infrastructure that CPEC projects provide. While it is unclear just how much CPEC has boosted industrial productivity and job creation, the various projects have put Pakistan on a path toward sustainable economic growth (Rafiq 2017).

These three pillars collectively have resulted in Pakistan creating a security-centric foreign policy; one that focuses—and prioritizes—its security interests over any other, such as economic interests. As a postcolonial state, Pakistan is hypersensitive about its territory, and became even more so after the 1971 war, which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh. Prioritizing physical security, however, is not a problem. Rather, it is a necessity. Yet,

Pakistan's prioritizing its physical security has led it to create a foreign policy that is too focused on its rivalry with India, too influenced by the United States, and too dependent on China. Above all, Pakistan's foreign policy puts security first, and its economy second, rather than on equal footing, which has ultimately led to the country practicing a foreign policy that reduces its ontological security. Covid-19, however, provides an opening to change this.

Covid-19 as a Critical Interruption

As described previously, a critical interruption is part of the process of a determining a state's ontological security. Critical interruptions are events that do not necessarily threaten a state's self-identity needs, yet they force states to respond, and generate and regenerate narratives that legitimize and justify the state's policy choices, which result in institutionalized routines. Some examples of critical interruptions are military coups, terrorist attacks, faulty elections, hurricanes, etc. While critical interruptions can be both predictable and unpredictable, they are always political. As the logic of ontological security dictates, the state's self-identity needs are constant—a state needs a stable identity to function in the world, just like a state needs to protect its territory to function in the international system. A critical interruption, therefore, disrupts state policies, forcing state agents to utilize the biographical narrative to respond through institutional changes, such as writing new legislation, creating specialized institutions and forces, eliminating an institution, reorganizing bureaucracy, and so on.

The state's ability to pursue ontological security is also dependent on how it deals with crises. Yet, not all crises are unpredictable, except rare environmental ones like tsunamis and earthquakes. As crises are social constructions, the time frames of when an event gets labeled "crisis" varies and depends on the actor. For example, the events that led up to the Cuban missile crisis, and the crisis itself, actually spanned a much longer period for both the Soviets and Cubans than it did for the Americans (Weldes 1999, 37–40). Second, not all crises threaten a state's self-identity or its routines. I argue that instead, crises "interrupt" routines, forcing state agents to manipulate state narratives to either create, alter, or end institutionalized routines via state institutions. Therefore, I use the label "critical interruptions." It is important to note that "critical interruptions" are not "critical junctures." Within historical and sociological institutionalism, "critical junctures" are defined as periods of significant change followed by a period of "path dependence" in which an institution follows a specific trajectory that is either maintained or reinforced over time (Pierson 2004, 54–78; George and Bennett 2005, 167; Gerring 2007, 2559–2560). The concept of critical junctures is employed in institutional analysis to uncover causality and examine structural (such as economic, cultural, ideological, organizational) influences on political action (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). A critical interruption,

however, is not concerned with causality in a strict, nomological sense, and cannot be studied as isolated incidents that affect institutions.

Critical interruptions are social constructions, and are intimately linked with the construction, reconstruction, and deconstruction of state identity. In this way, critical interruptions are more about the politics of practices and language of representation (Edelman 1988, 31). State agents are authorized to act on behalf of the state, and hence are responsible for acts that represent state actions. How state agents respond to crises and how crises affect state agents is co-constitutive: state identity can enable a critical interruption or conversely a critical interruption can enable state identity. Critical interruptions are not objective facts but rather political acts whose representation can be contested (Weldes 1999, 61).[17] For Weldes (1996) and Campbell (1998), state identity enabling a crisis is more logical because the subject is obvious: the anthropomorphized state subject produced in the foreign policy discourses of institutionalized states. This applies to critical interruptions as well. But how critical interruptions enable state identity varies from how Steele's (2008) "critical situations" enable state identity. In Steele's (2008) conceptualization, crises present a threat to a state's self-identity because they force state agents to take action and alter or end institutionalized routines (1284–1286). I argue that not all crises are threats, and so any changes made in institutionalized routines is not because of any danger associated with a threat. Rather, changes in institutionalized routines point to self-identity crises within the state over how the state constructs its self-identity needs, and consequently how the state views itself and wants to be viewed by others. Identities are constructed in relation to difference, where difference and identity are both fluid (Campbell 1998, 175–179). Identities are not necessarily constructed to counter threats or a different threatening Other (Campbell 1998, 232–235; Hansen 2006, 6–7).

Critical interruptions, however, are not just threats. Instead, they are significant events that enable and benefit state identity in three ways. First, they allow the state to claim sovereignty over their territory, and a monopoly of violence and the type of violence in the name of protecting that territory. By claiming to be the sole representative and/or sole protector of its population, the state reinforces itself within the international system. Second, critical interruptions allow the state agents to create institutions or structures of power that allow them—and by extension the state—to consolidate power internally (Tilly 1985, 171; Barnett 1992; Weldes 1999, 58). To do so, state agents use the state's narratives to legitimize and justify the state's consolidation of power over other actors within the state vying for power. Critical interruptions, therefore, are intrinsically related to the creation of a state's biographical narrative about self-identity, where the interaction of critical interruptions and narratives connects observable activities to policy responses. And third, critical interruptions allow for the articulation and rearticulation of the relationship between identity and difference as means to constitute and secure the state's self-identity (Weldes 1999, 58). I share

Campbell's (1998), Connolly's (1991), and Weldes's (1996, 1999) understanding of identity as always discursively constructed and produced in relationship with difference, where difference and identity are mutually constitutive. Hence, my conceptualization of critical interruptions takes into account the genealogy of identity within security studies, in which I am influenced by Michal Williams' (1998) argument. He asserts that debates within IR theory should not be between objectivist and positivist theoretical foundations. Instead, they should be more focused on the history of security studies and the politics surrounding theorizing security, which will highlight how identity—and difference—has been constructed to emphasize material power and create an objective foundation of analysis (Williams 1998).

Based on these criteria, as well as the politicization of the pandemic and Pakistan's subsequent response to Covid-19—creating the NCOC, using intelligence surveillance for contact-tracing, implementing "smart lockdowns," allowing mosques to remain open during Ramadan in 2020, etc.—indicate that the pandemic is a "critical interruption," and therefore, an opportunity for the state to make serious changes to its foreign policy. Furthermore, the politicization of Covid-19 is not just a phenomenon that Pakistan experienced, but one that is global in nature. In the case of Pakistan, the pandemic's politicization began when President Alvi agreed with religious leaders to keep mosques open during the month of Ramadan in 2020, despite the federal government issuing a nationwide lockdown.[18] So, mosques remained open and many prayed there, creating pockets where the virus could—and eventually—did spread. Civil society criticized the government for being weak on the lockdown, creating a clash between religious leaders and the general public. When vaccines were released, there was a great deal of misinformation and a poll released in January 2021 showed that 49% of Pakistanis did not want to get vaccinated.[19] Public awareness campaigns have helped, however.

Covid-19 as a Critical Interruption for Pakistan

The government of Pakistan responded as quickly as one would expect a developing country to respond. The timeline of major Covid-19-related events details the most significant actions of the government, but underlying these actions were two kinds of divisions: civil–military and socio-religious. While the socio-religious factors are important for understanding Pakistan's domestic policy and actions, the civil–military tensions provide a window into the country's foreign policy as well.

As described earlier, President Alvi's statements resulted in mosques remaining open during the second wave of the pandemic, creating dangerous pockets that eventually spread the disease. The Khan administration is scared of the religious right of Pakistan and the mob mentality. In Pakistan, no religious party has been able to win an election but in some ways it really doesn't need to because it has an unprecedented emotional hold on the people. The religious right...control the mob (Butt 2016). This is why

Table 5.1 Timeline of Major Covid-19 Events in Pakistan

	Event
January 2020	Balochistan and Gilgit-Balistan started taking precautionary measures to control the spread of Covid-19.
February 2020	Two cases of Covid-19 are confirmed in the beginning of the month. Closes border with China and Iran.
March 2020	Number of cases increase exponentially. All airports, except Islamabad, Lahore, and Karachi, are closed. Government announces a Rs. 1.2 trillion relief package for low-income groups. All provincial governments announced relief packages too.
April 2020	Number of cases keeps increasing. Government started its first lockdown, but mosques are reopened, leading to criticism regarding the government's mixed messages. State Bank of Pakistan introduces a temporary refinance scheme for businesses to deter layoffs.
May 2020	Government creates the National Command and Operation Center (NCOC) to coordinate its response. Federal government ends lockdown on May 9.
June 2020	Orders border with Afghanistan, allowing exports for the first time in three months.
July 2020	Trade relations with Afghanistan resume.
December 2020	Purchases 1.2 million doses of Covid-19 vaccine from China (called Sinopharm).
January 2021	China provides half a million vaccine does for free. Through COVAX, Pakistan received 17 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine.
March 2021	Lockdown is lifted on March 15.
May 2021	The Delta variant creates a spike in coronavirus cases in the state.

President Alvi's reluctance to close the mosques even during a pandemic was not possible as it ties into the country's "defender of Islam" mentality—and one of the primary ways it achieves ontological security.

The ways in which Pakistan's civil–military imbalance, however, become even more prominent during the pandemic does not just indicate how deep the imbalance is, but also provides a lens by which to reevaluate the country's foreign policy. For example, the formation of the NCOC in of itself is not odd, and neither is the fact that it is a joint institution, shared by the civilian and military sides. After all, several countries share bureaucracies. The NCOC's structure, however, indicates the power, prominence, and reliance on the military: instead of a chief minister or a federal health minister, the task of overseeing the coordination between federal and provincial governments was given to Commander of Army's Air Defense Command, Lt-Gen.

Hamood Uz Zaman Khan. What this means is that NCOC, which is tasked with optimizing information, decision-making related to Covid-19 and implementation of "smart lockdowns" to prevent the virus' spread, and which is supposed to serve as a liaison between the National Security Committee and the National Coordination Committee, falls under the care of the military.

In Pakistan's case, the pandemic highlighted several obvious and underlying political, social, and economic issues plaguing the country, as it did with almost every country. However, Covid-19 has also made Pakistani policymakers and the military leadership realize the importance of—and most significantly the need for—a strong economy. Without prioritizing the creation of a sustainable economy that is not dependent on IMF loans and developmental aid, Pakistan will remain insecure.

Toward a Non-Flailing Foreign Policy

Pivoting a foreign policy, and the geostrategic and national security interests that underlie it, is a Herculean task, and one that is rare and not easily achievable. Yet, it is not impossible. While Covid-19 and the lives it has claimed is a tragedy, it has also been a wake-up call for the world—and South Asia in particular. In South Asia, the pandemic has highlighted the weaknesses in government's public health systems, public mistrust with the government, the power of misinformation regarding public health and safety, and government's weak capacity in distributing vaccines. While most of these issues have been domestic-focused, all of these have also impacted each state's foreign policy. For Pakistan, the impact can be debated but one thing is clear: Covid-19 has provided Pakistan with the rare opportunity to make some series changes to its foreign policy.

There are three policies that Pakistan should invest in so that it can complete its foreign policy pivot; from a foreign policy that prioritizes security concerns over economic ones to where security and economy are tied together, ensuring that economic well-being and development adds to the state's physical and ontological security. The first pathway is to increase transparent revenue streams, which will create a better business environment and encourage foreign direct investments, and others. None of these can be done without eradicating external and fiscal imbalances. Before Covid-19, Pakistan had successfully started an economic reform program supported by the IMF and was able to continue the program during the pandemic. For example, Pakistan's foreign exchange buffers increased during mid-2019, which was the worst of the pandemic. The fiscal deficit actually fell as the pandemic ebbed. During the pandemic, instead of collapsing, Pakistan's banking institutions remained strong. For example, the Central Bank was able to provide significant economic stimulus packages, such as loan restructuring to borrowers to combat economic disruptions, loan extension programs to ease cash constraints on borrowers, and refinancing to prevent layoffs.[20] While Pakistan still needs an IMF program, it is on a slow and steady path of developing sustainable revenue streams.

The second pathway is to prioritize regional and economic development partnerships. On his latest trip to the United States, National Security Advisor Moeed Yusuf explained Pakistan's economic pivot and focus on "regional connectivity."[21] The aim of this strategy is for Pakistan to serve as a mediator—and to be viewed as a viable, reliable, and practical arbitrator by its neighbors. To do this, Pakistan's regional relationships must go beyond traditional security, such as defense contracts, weapons' systems and arms sales, and joint-military training (all of which are important) but more toward facilitating the movement of people and goods: opening borders, allowing tourism visas, creating intra-country transit systems, etc.[22]

The third pathway is to get off the FATF grey list—and stay off. One of Pakistan's biggest challenges has been combating money-laundering and effectively implementing anti-terrorist financing practices. Part of the problem is Pakistan's use of militant groups to counter India, especially Indian-administered Kashmir-based jihadi groups. India wants the international community to hold Pakistan accountable, and has used several international organizations to do so, with the FATF being one of them. Regardless of India's motivations, implementing all of FATF's recommendations and investing in an anti-money laundering and terrorism financing framework would help Pakistan both politically and economically. Politically, it would help the state improve its reputation while economically it will increase confidence in the state, which would ultimately attract all kinds of investments, potentially resulting in steady job growth that the country desperately needs. As of late 2021, Pakistan had completed 27 action points that the FATF requested.

None of these pathways are simple, and neither can they be done without careful analysis. Pakistan's policy in Afghanistan also threatens these pathways. After the US withdrawal and the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, Pakistan has found itself in an advantageous position. Pakistan's alliance with the Taliban is not secret, even though the relationship has been deteriorating over the last two decades during the US war in Afghanistan. The Taliban have also evolved politically, though not ideologically. In the past, when the Taliban took over Kabul in 1996, the group was not really concerned with international recognition and legitimacy, which is not the case now. And this is where Pakistan finds itself as a mediator between the Taliban and the international community. The Khan administration have a friendly relationship with the Taliban, but since August 2021 the government has become more vocal about the international community working with the Taliban, while maintaining its official position of wanting a peaceful solution in Afghanistan. Yet, serving as a mediator between the Taliban and the world may be appealing to the Khan administration, it is a self-defeating long-term strategy for Pakistan. As an ally of the Taliban, Pakistan is actually in a position to hold the group accountable for its failed promises. Instead, Pakistan is again focusing on short-term security interests and basking in the moment where it's the main interlocutor in Afghanistan.

One thing is clear though: pivoting toward the economy and economic security will not only make Pakistan more physically secure, but will also make it more ontologically secure. Continuing to serve as a mediator between the Taliban and the world, however, will set Pakistan back to where it was: physically secure (perhaps) but ontologically insecure.

Conclusion

This chapter has used a novel approach to explain Pakistan's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the state's response. The ontological security framework, as outlined in this chapter, is based on the assumption that a state's ontological security is just as important and vital to its well-being as it's physical security. In other words, physical and ontological security are constants, and one that a state strives to achieve. Pakistan's ontological security is shaped by its relationship with India and Islam, both of which present the state with an existential crisis. These pillars of Pakistan's ontological security have resulted in the state having a foreign policy that has always prioritized its security needs over its economic ones, often creating a division between the two needs. Covid-19, however, has presented the state with a unique opportunity to pivot its foreign policy from a more security-centric one to an economic-centric one, where security and economic needs are equal. With this pivot in its foreign policy, Pakistan will be better positioned to secure itself physically and ontologically.

Notes

1 World Health Organization, https://covid19.who.int/region/emro/country/pk. Accessed on September 25, 2021.
2 Geo News, "Pakistan logs over 1,000 COVID-19 cases for fifth straight day," January 10, 2022, www.geo.tv/latest/392541-pakistan-logs-over-1000-cases-for-fifth-straight-day.
3 SAMAA, "Number of coronavirus cases in Pakistan jumps to 28: officials," March 13, 2020, www.samaa.tv/living/health/2020/03/number-of-coronavirus-cases-in-pakistan-jumps-to-28-officials.
4 Arif Alvi, Twitter, March 12, 2020, https://twitter.com/ArifAlvi/status/1238288917658587138.
5 Hufsa Chaudhry, "Budget 2020: Govt predicts 2.4pc growth, Rs7 trillion in expenditures," *Dawn*, June 12, 2019, www.dawn.com/news/1484102.
6 Kunwar Khuldune Shahid, "The IMF Takeover of Pakistan," *The Diplomat*, July 18, 2019, https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/the-imf-takeover-of-pakistan.
7 Library of Congress, "Pakistan: 'Smart Lockdown' Imposed across Cities of Pakistan as Covid-19 Cases Grow Rapidly," June 25, 2020, www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2020-06-25/pakistan-smart-lockdown-imposed-across-cities-of-pakistan-as-covid-19-cases-grow-rapidly.
8 See Niha Dagia and Niha Dagia, "Inside Pakistan's COVID-19 Contact Tracing," *The Diplomat*, July 1, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/inside-pakistans-covid-19-contact-tracing and Asad Hashim, "Pakistan using intelligence services to track coronavirus cases," Al Jazeera English, April 24, 2020, www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/4/24/pakistan-using-intelligence-services-to-track-coronavirus-cases.

9 Saeed Shah and Waqar Gillani, "In Pakistan, Saying 'No' to Covid-19 Vaccine Carries Consequences," *Wall Street Journal*, June 22, 2021, www.wsj.com/articles/saying-no-to-covid-19-vaccine-in-pakistan-carries-consequences-11624359601. Also see this Reuters tracker for daily updates: https://graphics.reuters.com/world-cor onavirus-tracker-and-maps/countries-and-territories/pakistan.

10 For an analysis and genealogy of "identity" within security studies, see Williams 1998.

11 Some examples of attacks where India has accused Pakistan are: 1) American cultural center in Kolkata on January 22, 2002; 2) in Kaluchak on May 14, 2002; and 3) on the Ram temple in Ayodhya on July 5, 2005 (attackers are believed to belong to Lashkar-e-Taiba); on military camp in Uri, near the Line of Control that divides Kashmir between India and Pakistan on September 19, 2016.

12 See Anchal Vohra, "Modi Took Complete Control of Kashmir 2 Years Ago— and Got Away with It," *Foreign Policy*, August 3, 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/03/modi-took-control-of-kashmir-2-years-ago-and-got-away-with-it/ and BBC World, "Viewpoint: Why Modi's Kashmir move is widely supported in India," August 15, 2019, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-49354697.

13 See Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "India will lobby to put Pakistan on FATF blacklist at Paris meet," *The Economic Times*, February 18, 2019, https://econom ictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-will-lobby-to-put-pakista n-on-fatf-blacklist-at-paris-meet/articleshow/68041049.cms and Naveed Siddiqui, "India's admission on FATF politization vindicates Pakistan's stance: FO," *Dawn*, July 19, 2021, www.dawn.com/news/1635854/indias-admission-on-fatf-politicisa tion-vindicates-pakistans-stance-fo.

14 Edith M. Lederer, "The AP Interview: Don't Isolate the Taliban, Pakistan Urges," Associated Press, September 23, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-afghanista n-united-nations-taliban-shah-mehmood-qureshi-258c17303271aa440cf60f5a9444e143.

15 Shi Jiangtao, "China puts Kashmir on United Nations agenda to boost isolated Paki-stan's cause," *South China Morning Post*, August 16, 2019, www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3023184/china-puts-kashmir-united-nations-agenda-boost-isolated.

16 *Global Times*, "65 Countries express opposition to interference in China's internal affairs at UN Human Rights Council," September 25, 2021, www.globaltimes. cn/page/202109/1235032.shtml.

17 I have used "environmental disaster" as an illustration of a critical interruption. While natural disasters do not start off as political acts, their politicization is dependent on the states' response and representation of the disaster. For exam-ple, Bangladesh's response to Cyclone Marion in 1991, the effect of the 2004 tsunami on conflicts in Sri Lanka and Indonesia, Pakistan's response to the 2005 earthquake in Azad Kashmir, and the US response to the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010, are all examples of natural disasters that became political as aid efforts and disaster management challenged various aspects of state sovereignty. In an ontological security framework, therefore, they have the potential to serve as critical interruptions.

18 International Crisis Group. "Pakistan's COVID-19 Crisis." Briefing No. 162. August 6, 2020. www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan/b162-pakistans-covid-19-crisis.

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20 United States Institute of Peace, "Pakistan's Economic Future: A Conversation with Pakistani Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin on Economic Stability, Pakistan's Regional Role, and Geoeconomics," October 13, 2021, www.usip.org/events/pa kistans-economic-future.

21 United States Institute of Peace, "Pakistan's National Security Outlook: A Conversation with Pakistani National Security Advisory Moeed Yusuf," August 5, 2021, www.usip.org/events/pakistans-national-security-outlook.

22 See Sahar Khan, "The Untapped Economic Potential of the Pakistan-Turkey Relationship," *South Asian Voices*, April 20, 2021, https://southasianvoices.org/the-untapped-economic-potential-of-the-pakistan-turkey-relationship.

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